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Stimulus money reduces welfare backlog in Maryland

Those in need get jobs as well as assistance

By Brent Jones, The Baltimore Sun

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Tira Jones can recognize desperation in a caller's tone. When she was an unemployed single mother in need of a financial boost, her voice used to sound the same way.

Now, in her full-time job processing online applications for food stamps for the state of Maryland, she is willing to share her story with other families looking for assistance — and put them at ease.

"I've learned to have patience in dealing with things because I have a lot of empathy for people," Jones said. "A lot of customers are scared to apply because they've never done it before, or [they think] they'll be embarrassed. But they're not by themselves."

Jones was one of 100 workers hired by the state Department of Human Resources last year to address growing delays in processing of food benefits and medical services for low-income Marylanders.

The jobs initiative — largely paid for with \$3.6 million in federal stimulus money — appears to be meeting dual goals: Maryland's assistance backlog is shrinking, and Jones and her new colleagues who were once collecting welfare benefits now have full-time jobs and a chance at advancement.

"This is a career track. It's not just 'make-work,' " said Vesta Kimble, acting deputy executive director in DHR. "It's not just a job that will just because the customer base starts to decrease when the recovery happens."

In 2009, the state was sued by an Owings Mills woman who had to wait more than two months for Medicaid benefits for her two children. Her case was joined by a city woman and a coalition of advocates, citing a law that requires emergency medical benefits and food stamps to be received by all applicants within 30 days. In December, a judge ordered the state to come into full compliance with that law by the end of 2010.

Facing the need to hire a group of workers to improve the compliance rate, the state launched the jobs initiative as a way to get clients off of assistance at the same time.

Jones, 30, was applying for emergency cash assistance at a Baltimore social services center last

spring when she learned about the opportunity for a full-time, full-benefits state job. She was selected in November, and she and other program members went to work. The food stamp compliance rate now stands at about 89 percent statewide, up 6 percentage points since the beginning of February, according to the DHR.

There are 12 employees from the program, including Jones, devoted to handling online applications from Baltimore County, working from the agency's office on Guilford Avenue. Baltimore County had been one of the state's worst at providing services on time, after county workers were flooded with a disproportionately high number of applications at the height of the recession.

The workers verify personal information and conduct phone interviews with potential clients, relieving the local departments of that duty. The other 88 employees in the program have been placed in offices throughout Maryland.

"We're getting very much needed administrative help," said Nancy Lineman, a spokeswoman for the DHR.

The work can be taxing. But state officials say it could lead to a bigger payoff. The team has handled about 3,500 applications in seven months and helped increase Baltimore County's food stamp compliance rate to 80 percent, up about 20 percentage points since earlier this year.

And agency members say that the aides' work will not end once the DHR is in compliance and demand drops. They have the chance to become case managers.

Jones said she could envision herself a longtime state employee. A single mother raising her 8-year-old daughter, she had previously worked as a kitchen supervisor at a prison and for Greyhound before losing both of those jobs. She spent much of 2008 homeless, bouncing her daughter from school to school as the two traveled in and out of friends' homes.

During that time, Jones said she filled out applications at McDonald's and Wendy's to no avail.

"It was hard finding a job on my own. Things were getting tight, and I needed to apply for some financial assistance," Jones said.

After she was accepted in the program, Jones and the others went through five weeks of training, where they learned the intricacies of the state's computer system. The steady state salary of about \$27,000 she gets allowed her to purchase a home recently in West Baltimore and pay for classes at Baltimore City Community College.

"She just brings a professionalism that is appropriate for the job," said Victoria Rideout, a state employee for 17 years who is Jones' supervisor. "They all come with very unique stories. They've been in some trenches, and to go from where they were to where they are now, it makes it easy to work with them because they are compliant."

Eugene Laster said he and his co-workers were grateful just to be working. Laster heard about the program when he went to apply for food stamps last year.

Married with three kids, Laster, 34, had been unemployed for about a year after losing his job with a security company. He had come off previous stints working at a city schools cafeteria, hauling meat for a factory and sterilizing birdseed for another company.

Laster thought he would stay with the birdseed provider because "it kept me in shape and paid good money," but the position, he said, "ran its course."

Down to his last few dollars, Laster applied for food stamps. When approached about the job, he took to the idea of working for the state. He was familiar with how state agencies work, having entered the foster care system after his mother died when he was 11.

"When I went and got food stamps, it was the same office I went to foster care at, right there on Biddle Street. It was no shame in my game," Laster said.

On average, the workers handle about 20 applications a day. Laster calls his job stressful but rewarding. He said he fielded one call from an older woman who applied for food stamps but only qualified for \$16 a month.

When Laster broke the news to her, "She told me, 'Baby, don't worry about it.' She was happy. And that made me happy," he said.

An added benefit, Laster said, is that he and his co-workers have become friends, which is not always the case in the workplace.

Jones took it a step further.

"We're family. We argue, we fuss, we laugh, we cry," Jones said. "This is home, our second home."

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